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A reflection from a polio patient at the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas

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ABSTRACT

Similar to the current coronavirus pandemic, the polio pandemic during the early 20th century impacted the entire world, leaving many children permanently disabled. The Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children was created to address this need. In this article, Dewain Collins tells his story of being treated for polio by Dr. William Beall Carrell at Scottish Rite in the 1930s.

KEYWORDS Pandemic; polio; William Beall Carrell

Similar to the current coronavirus pandemic, the polio pandemic during the early 20th century impacted the entire world, leaving many children permanently disabled and communities fragmented from the lack of social interactions to prevent the spread of the disease. In most instances, rural communities, which had less access to medical care, were disproportionally affected by the polio pandemic. To address this disparity, the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Children was officially chartered on October 6, 1921, by a group of five community leaders who were also members of the Masonic Fraternity.[1] They were named the first board of trustees of the hospital. This leadership group approached Dallas' first orthopedic surgeon, Dr. William Beall Carrell, about treating children with polio free of charge *(Figure 1a)*.

Soon, Dr. Carrell offered his services and clinic space and began seeing 35 polio cases each week.[1] As word continued to spread throughout Texas and the caseload increased, the clinic treated 500 patients and had 1000 applications waiting from 150 Texas counties. The Texas Masons determined that a hospital facility was needed to accommodate future growth. The Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children was built on 3 acres in Dallas's Oak Lawn area at the corner of Welborn and Sylvester Streets. The original structure was a two-story red brick building with a 15-bed patient ward *(Figure 1b)*.

The impact of the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children is hard to fully grasp. However, polio patients who survived under its care have expressed enormous gratitude. One such patient, Dewain Collins of Lubbock, took time to share his account of contracting polio and being under the care of Dr. Carrell at the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children.

INTERVIEW WITH DEWAIN COLLINS

In August 1937, my dad hitched a team of horses to a wagon, and we went down the road a couple of miles to a neighbor's house for Sunday dinner. It was my dad, my mother, my sister (about 9 years old), and myself, 11 months old. We had an old car, but it was up on blocks so the tires would not rot because we could not afford gasoline for it. We farmed with horses. Sometime that afternoon I began to get sick, and we returned home. A couple of days later they decided to take me to the doctor in Weatherford (17 miles away on dirt roads) because I was paralyzed from the waist down. The doctor diagnosed it right off as infantile paralysis (later known as polio). He suggested that my parents find some Masons and get me into the Scottish Rite Hospital in Dallas. In 1921, Masons in Dallas were looking for some charitable work they could do, and infantile paralysis was running rampant; in 1916, there was a large outbreak in New York City. So the Masons went to the only orthopedic surgeon in Dallas and asked if he would come and operate a hospital for children if they built it. That was Dr. Carrell, and he started seeing patients in his clinic before the hospital was built.

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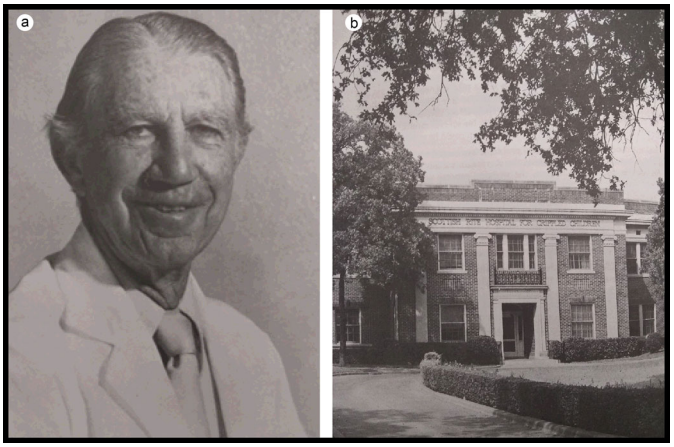

Figure 1. (a) Dr. William Beall Carrell. **(b)** Scottish Rite Hospital for Children, 1929.

The hospital was completed about 1927. Scottish Rite built a reputation for treating children from all walks of life and still does that today. Not much was known about polio. Scientists did not know where it came from, what caused it, or how to treat it. A cure was developed in the 1950s. The Masons had the forethought in the 1920s to get donations to build a hospital. Never a bill was sent, and we could not afford to pay one if it were sent. We had the farm, but in the 1930s you could barely afford to sell your crops.

We were about 80 miles from Dallas. I don't know how we got to the hospital; perhaps a neighbor took us. The hospital told my parents they could see me on Sunday afternoons from 2 to 4, adding that with my age it would be better if they did not come at all, as it could be upsetting. They could not afford to go on Sunday. There were no telephones or electricity, and so they could not even check on me.

The first thing the hospital did was strap me to a board because very little was known about paralysis at the time. But there are three types of polio—muscular, spinal, and respiratory—and they were concerned that I might have spinal, which causes the spine to become badly disfigured. My parents had to wait for a letter to tell them to come and get me. I don't know how long I was on the board, but I do know that I came home still on it. When school started in September, my sister was not allowed to go to school for fear that she might be a carrier. I was the only one in the community to get it. After about a month or so, the school board met, and she was allowed to return to school.

The postman delivered mail every day except Sunday, and when the hospital wrote a letter with an appointment for me, two train tickets were enclosed, a round trip from Weatherford to Dallas. We just had to drive to Weatherford to catch the train. If I was lucky enough to be getting new shoes when arriving at the hospital, they first sent me to the shoe shop to be fitted for shoes. They then took the shoes apart and fitted them with braces, which were ready by the time I left in the afternoon.

When I was in the second grade, I had an operation on both feet, and they put on a cast on me that extended to the knee. These "walking casts" were built extended on the bottom and then an old tire was cut from sidewall to sidewall (about 2 inches wide, including the tread) and was built onto the raised portion of the cast. During the war, resources were hard to find; that is why an old tire was used. I was supposed to walk on them, and even though I walked on crutches at the time, for some reason I could not walk with them. I could not get on the school bus, so I was not going to school. An old janitor at the school heard about this and told my mother, "You put him on the bus, and I will meet it and take him to his classroom. At recess I will take him to the bathroom and then take him outside and set him on a rock fence so he can watch the other children play. Then I'll take him back to the classroom." He did the same thing at lunch and put me on the bus to go home. This probably went on for 6 or 8 weeks until I got out of the cast. I walked on crutches for many years, and the doctors kept wanting me to give them up. I was not too interested, because with them I could keep up with the other children on the farm and without them I was limited. Somehow after 10 or 12 years, I gave them up and walked without them for 60-plus years. I used them if I had to do a lot of walking.

Now that I am old, I have to use them again. As you know, the 1930s was the Depression, and nobody had any money, and you were blessed if you had food on the table. Jobs were scarce. I suppose that we had food as we raised chickens, hogs, and cattle and we farmed peanuts, cotton, and corn.

The Scottish Rite Hospital was a blessing sent from God, and he directed the Masons to do something good for mankind. The hospital has a wide reputation for what it does. Doctors from all over the world go there to study the latest treatments to take back and put to use. I will never, ever be able to repay the Masons or the hospital for what they did for me, but in my own small way I support them every day. God bless the Scottish Rite Hospital and God bless Masons everywhere for what they stand for and do.

CONCLUSION

The legacy of the Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children stands as a reminder of the impact modern medicine has had in our world. The dedication of physicians with the Masonic community is often untold. Yet for these patients, such actions of devotion and compassion strike at the heart of what continues to inspire new generations of physicians to continue the work of healing and comforting the infirm, downtrodden, and vulnerable members of society.

1. Nelson PL. *The Story of the Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children*. Dallas, TX: Texas Scottish Rite Hospital for Crippled Children; 1990.